

ADOT studies a second route north

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NORTH VALLEY – Some residents say an alternate route north toward Flagstaff, to alleviate heavy traffic on Interstate 17, is needed sooner than later.

The Arizona Department of Transportation held an open house June 6 at Boulder Creek High School to take public comment on whether another route is needed and to gather suggestions for locating such a route.

Although the state Transportation Board ordered ADOT to conduct a study—now in its preliminary stages—to look at possible alternatives to I-17, the study's project manager, Dale Buskirk, told residents any alternate highway would be "long range – 20 to 30 years in the future."

A number of North Valley residents said they thought the road is needed as soon as possible due to traffic backups on I-17, particularly on weekends.

"The alternate route is a great idea, but in 30 years Phoenix will have a population of six million people and this road (I-17) will already be obsolete," said Phoenix resident Luther Allen. "Traffic is already backed up on I-17. I try to avoid the road like the plague."

ADOT is in the process of expanding I-17 from the Loop 101 to Anthem, but the department has said mountainous terrain, an aging infrastructure and other challenges are limitations to widening the existing interstate north of New River.

ADOT staff acknowledges a single I-17 accident can back up traffic for hours.

"As the state continues to grow, we may need to identify alternative corridors," Buskirk said.

The transportation department held three similar meetings recently in Flagstaff, Prescott Valley and Camp Verde. The study is expected to be completed by April 2008.

Anthem resident Thomas Driessen said ADOT needs to stay on top of the state's growth. He would like to see an alternate route started in the next five years.

ADOT drawings presented at the meeting showed several possible future routes, including one extending State Route 51 north from Loop 101, passing just west of Cave Creek and east of the Agua Fria National Monument (northeast of Black Canyon City), then branching northwest toward Seligman and/or northeast toward Flagstaff. Another

possible route would start at the planned 303 Corridor and parallel I-17 to the west, branching northwest and/or northeast in the area of Dewey/Humboldt.

These routes are not ADOT proposals but only ideas the department floated at the meeting, pointing out it is open to suggestions. Following the study, transportation staff may conclude no alternate route is needed.

"I think there is more traffic on I-17 than ADOT knows," said Anthem resident John Goad. "The traffic counters get pushed away, so they are not getting accurate counts."

Goad also stated 18-wheelers back up traffic on weekends. "ADOT knows there's a lot of traffic on I-17."

Another Anthem resident, Dene Wallace, said she and her husband Bob came to the meeting to ask ADOT to build more access roads or exits between Anthem and Happy Valley Road.

"When there is a wreck on I-17, traffic is backed up for two hours," Mrs. Wallace emphasized.

Phoenix resident Jim Vaaler stated freeway congestion is caused by the state legislature's unwillingness to require developers to put in the necessary infrastructure before a planned community is allowed to break ground.

"Otherwise, you don't have a planned community, just total chaos," he said.

Vaaler went on to say developers should be forced to bear the costs of infrastructure. "But I don't think the legislature will do that; it will take a ballot initiative," he added.

ADOT will continue to take comments through June 20.